Protecting America from Terrorism
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Before the attacks of September 11, 2001, U.S. counterterrorist efforts were meager compared with those of today, and largely confined to a small cadre of specialists deep inside the intelligence community. Now many government agencies are involved in some aspect of counterterrorism.

In a nondescript, unmarked building in the northern Virginia suburbs of Washington, D.C. sits the heart of U.S. counterterrorism -- the National Counterterrorism Center. From this heart, arteries extend far out to agencies across the U.S. government to pump out and take in the lifeblood of the counterterrorism effort -- information.

Genesis of the N.C.T.C.

The N.C.T.C. was created by President Bush in 2004 as a direct outgrowth of the 9/11 attacks. Several investigations and commissions all pointed out that the terrorists who attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were able to evade detection in part because agencies in the secretive intelligence world, protective of their turf and their sources, were not sharing enough information.

In an interview in his office, Scott Redd, the retired admiral whom President Bush chose to head the center, says the Counterterrorism Center exists to ensure that information flows freely, and that analysts tracking terrorism have access to the widest intelligence possible.

"What N.C.T.C. does, which is unique, is we bring together all elements of foreign and domestic intelligence relating to the terrorism threat. So by law, any intelligence information relating to terrorism, whether it's foreign or domestic, comes in here," says Redd. "Our job is to make sure that a) people are talking to each other and b) that it is all integrated. We do that in a number of ways. Clearly information-sharing is one of our big jobs."

Inside the N.C.T.C.

In N.C.T.C.'s high-tech operations center, intelligence analysts of other federal agencies like the C.I.A., F.B.I., Defense Intelligence Agency, and Department of Homeland Security, sit side by side, each in front of several computer screens to connect to their home agency databases. Large plasma screens line the walls monitoring different activities, like air traffic and overhead imagery from satellites. The Counterterrorism Center also has its own highly classified, secure web site where information is pooled.

Some information is collected by America's foreign intelligence agencies, such as the C.I.A. or the National Security Agency. Other intelligence comes from domestic sources, like Homeland Security and its sub-agencies, and the F.B.I.

Coordinating U.S. Intelligence

The Counterterrorism Center is unique in that about 95 percent of the people who work there are not actually N.C.T.C. employees. They are analysts sent by their home agency on temporary assignment to the center.

John Brennan, former head of the C.I.A.'s own counterterrorism center, says the advent of the N.C.T.C. does not mean the death knell for the individual counterterrorism centers in intelligence agencies."It's not an attempt at all to diminish the capabilities of the C.I.A. or the Defense Intelligence Agency or others. The N.C.T.C. is designed, though, to bring together and pool those resources where it makes sense to bring them together."

The N.C.T.C. does not engage in counterterrorism operations; those are left to agencies like the C.I.A. The likes of Jack Bauer, the fictional counterterrorism agent seen on the American TV series "24," does not reside at the N.C.T.C. But as Admiral Redd says, the center does draw up a strategic government-wide counterterrorism plan, which includes specific operational tasks for each agency.

"We don't do operations, we don't direct the execution of operations. And we also don't collect intelligence here; that's collected by all the other agencies, that comes in here," says Redd. "We are responsible, however, for the strategic operational planning, for making sure that the plan, once we've developed the plan which we have done and was done about a year ago for the first time in the history of our country, that the plan is being implemented, and that the plan is ultimately being successful, in other words, assessing it."

Assessing U.S. Counterterror Efforts

There is widespread agreement among independent analysts that the intelligence lapses of 9/11 clearly underscored the need for better cooperation and information sharing among agencies. But there is concern in some quarters about the possibility of too much centralization or adding more bureaucracy.

Bill Nolte, former deputy assistant director for analysis at the C.I.A., says cooperation is of course necessary, but agencies still must maintain their unique character and mission. "Any time that you deploy resources and say 'our folks have been too scattered,' you run the risk that you will overreact and overconcentrate them. I think that's one of the dangers of this whole post 9/11 situation -- that you'll go from an intelligence community that was insufficiently integrated to one that is too centralized," says Nolte.

There has been no successful terrorist attack on U.S. soil since 9-11, and many independent analysts credit that at least in part to the N.C.T.C. But as intelligence officers often say, to succeed in their task, counterterrorism officials have to be lucky 100 percent of the time. But the terrorists only have to be lucky once.

Next time on *Focus*, we'll look at the personnel challenges facing U.S. counterterrorism and intelligence agencies in the post 9/11 era.